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Vice President Bush: 'I Don't See Anything New'

Excerpts from Vice President Bush's news conference in Des Moines:

Sen. Dole said you are going to have to come clean now, that this shows you had more knowledge than you ever indicated you had.

Well, if somebody could explain to me what that meant I'd be glad to try to answer. I've answered—we've had 82 press conferences since March. I've answered questions over and over again on this subject. I'll be delighted to respond to his specific questions. . . . But I don't see anything new [in The Washington Post article]. I've said that I stood solidly with the president. I've said that when I have the advantage of the same hindsight that others did that a lot of mistakes were made. I said I do not approve of arms for hostages. And neither does the president. The president wouldn't have approved of the deal if he felt it was arms for hostages . . . .

When did it become clear [that it was arms for hostages], Mr. Vice President? What day?

The full disclosure came when [Minnesota Sen.] David Durenberger came out to brief me [in December 1986] after a lot of hearings and testimony from various people that participated.

What about when you were sitting in Jerusalem with Mr. Amiram Nir [in July 1986]?

It didn't seem then that it was arms for hostages. I knew exactly that there were two tracks—one track was to free the hostages, one track was to establish these credentials. But you know, let me tell you something. The president and the vice president, when Americans are held hostage, probably care more about that than others. I particularly cared when reports coming in on the alleged torture of [CIA station chief William] Buckley. So maybe I'll put a little more emphasis on getting Americans freed from tyranny, from being held by terrorists and maybe we reached out a little bit more in retrospect than we should have. But I have no regrets about erring on the side of human life . . . . And I think the American people identify with that, I think they feel that this matter has been thoroughly examined . . . . I don't think anyone has ever accused me of anything dishonest. Nothing culpable in that sense, at all. And if one wants to fault one's judgment in retrospect, fine. I've said I'll take my share of the responsibility for that. Give me half the credit for all the good things we've done.

[Hasn't] the time come that maybe you have to tell what advice you gave the president, what reservations we had . . . ?

I'm not going to do that. The time hasn't come for you to give me your sources, for [Washington Post reporter] Dave Hoffman to give me your sources, the time hasn't come for Supreme Court justices to say in a conference what they tell each other. The time hasn't come when the vice president has to go out and help himself politically by saying what he's told the president. But I have reservations, I said it, some of them were testified to . . . . You know, I saw some reference in one of these stories to the 9 o'clock meetings. Let me tell you how it works. Somebody comes in there, like it's [then-White House chief of staff] Don Regan, me and the president. Did you hear anything new on the hostages today? Got anything new on that? Has it moved forward at all? We'll ask [then-national security adviser John] Poindexter. Poindexter would come into the room. No we haven't had a report. That's the end of that meeting. Then you go on and talk about the budget or talk about something else. And then three days later you might say well, this initiative that involved Terry Waite, I wonder if that's going to make any progress. It wasn't planning and discussing and going over all these details like a National Security Council meeting where you'd have the director of CIA and head of the FBI and Joint Chiefs. That never took place. I think that's one of the mistakes. If that had gone on everybody would have had all the information the other had. So I think in retrospect, the option that we have taken to change NSC procedures on that kind of covert action is a good thing . . . .

The Iran initiative started about May of 1985. Sen. Durenberger met with you in December of 1986. During that entire period did you really begin to smell a rat?

Not really, no.

Did you say, "This is beginning to smell like arms for hostages?"

I could see that it got a little close but not enough to say this was arms for hostages. And I was persuaded by the president's view on that. And he said here's two tracks—one track, let's get the hostages out; two, try to establish contact with the so-called contacts in Iran. And that prevailed . . . .

. . . It was a year and a half, you were the director of the CIA . . . you had the credentials to put a cold eye to these kinds of things. Do you think this in any way goes to your personal judgment to go through this period, maybe not on every single thing.

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Some will try to make it that, yeah.

Do you think it's fair?

No . . . . When you get facts afterward it's all quite clear . . . . And it's also easy afterward to see, hey, we shouldn't of done this, this was wrong. But prospectively, not.

If the president said it was all right for you to disclose the advice you provided on Iran-contra, would you?

I've already disclosed, it's been disclosed by Poindexter, under oath.

On Jan. 7 [1986], there is a full NSC meeting . . .

No, I beg your pardon, there was not a full NSC meeting.

The report says there was. Were you there?

Not at a full NSC meeting on that date.

Who wasn't there.

I don't know. I wasn't at a full NSC meeting.

[Then-CIA Director William] Casey was there, [then-Secretary of Defense Caspar] Weinberger, [Secretary of State George] Shultz, you, the president—those are the principals of the NSC.

[Were] the Joint Chiefs of Staff there, the FBI there? There was not to my recollection—I'll go back and look at my notes—a full NSC meeting.

Did you hear the objections aired that day by Shultz and Weinberger?

I don't recall that.

It seems this is a central question about your candidacy. Were you in fact a full participant in this administration or were you a bit player who was kept in the dark?

I think in some meetings I did not attend, and the record has shown that, and some meetings I did. But there's no question about trying to jump away from it. I support the president. I stood with the president solidly. I did not think it was arms for hostages.

Why can't you tell us what your reservations [other than Israel's role] were?

Because I don't feel inclined to discuss what I've talked to the president about. But when I hear that the hostages are going to be released in three days, and it doesn't take place, I'm concerned about it, I'll express a reservation. What's happening there? These people legitimate to deal with? Is it working or not? It's always with the emphasis on how do you free American lives.

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